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ABSTRACT

Although it has been said that the women in Ancient Egypt enjoyed a reasonable state of social and professional equality with men, this paper presents an alternate theory--that women were second-class citizens whose physical prowess was secondary to their role as sex objects. It appears that men and women in Ancient Egypt often participated in the same activities. Women, however, seem always to have been a few steps behind. Pharaohs kept hundreds of young girls, yet there is no record of queens keeping young men. Records indicate that when families went fishing, the man pulled in the fish, while the woman supported his efforts. It is suggested that men had control over tomb-painting and writing, the two most valuable stores of information on the nature of women's role in the society. This may account for the high proportion of illustrations showing women in sex-object roles. (MM)

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PAPER PRESENTED TO THE FOURTH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR SPORT HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON, JUNE 16-19, 1976

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"WOMEN - SEX OBJECTS IN ANCIENT EGYPT"

It has been said that the women in Ancient Egypt enjoyed a reasonabl state of social and professional equality with men. To support such a contention one can cite laws such as the following:

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> If a woman so hated her husband that she has declared, "You may not have me," her record shall be investigated at her city council, and if she was careful and was not at fault, even though her husband has been going out and disparaging her greatly, that women, without incurring any blame at all, may take her dowry and go off to her father's house.[1]

It is fairly obvious that such a law refers to the upper-class ladies. However, the peasant-women also had equality. They were allowed to work in the rich silt of the inundating Nile and to suffer most of the hardships imposed upon their spouses.

The upper-class ladies enjoyed watching and participating in many activities alongside their husbands. They watched entertainment that was provided by members of both sexes. They sat with their husbands at these spectacles; they ate with the men at the feasts; they drank with the men at the banquets and, on occasion of over-indulgence, vomited with their men.

The Royal women played a very significant role, because succession to the throne was through the female line. On occasion, of course, the succession did not follow the prescribed lines, but even here the ladies were often triumphant and some concubine found herself the mother of the new Pharaoh. The Pharaoh was believed to be a god, and therefore the members of his family shared in this divinity a fact which made brother-sister marriages in the Royal family very sensible. On a few occasions, the women went one step better than simply being consorts of the Kings and became Pharaohs in their own right. Thus, at the highest level of Ancient Egyptian society the ladies had, if not equality, a very strong position.

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1. James B. Pritchard, (ed.), THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1958, p. 154.

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Moving still higher up the social scale, we find that, while two or three major deities were gods, many of the most important were goddesses.

Looking at the total picture one can see that the ladies had prominent positions, were important and influential, but, overall were one step behind the men. Low-born men could improve their lot by becoming scribes, as could the women, but it seems that there were far fewer female-scribes than male. Men could become priests, while ladies could become priestesses, but the most important religious figures seem to have been men, and, of course, the Arch-priest was the Pharaoh, who was,almost always, a man. In keeping with this general trend, pyramids were built for the Pharaohs, not for the Queens.

And while there is no record of the Queens keeping hundreds of young men for their physical pleasure, (although there IS record of sexual excesses by some of them) the Pharaoh had his harem of some two hundred young girls who were selected for their physical charms and whose sole function was to satisfy their lord and master. In return they led a life of ease and luxury. They dined on the best food, drank the best wine, were dressed in the finest linens and bedecked with the most beautiful jewelry. Their house was a magnificent palace with baths, maternity quarters, children's nurseries. music-rooms, games-rooms and dancing halls. Their time was passed in practising their singing, their dancing and their music, ready for the time when the Pharaoh would summon them.

For those many girls who could not make it all the way to the Pharaoh's household, there were the temples where young girls could become dancers and live a life of luxury in the "House of Song". From the age of six, they were taken under the supervision of the priests and taught singing, music, games and dancing.

Failing both of these possibilities, a young girl could become attached to the household of some nobleman.

If I seem to be dwelling rather on this aspect of life for the ladies, please forgive me. Perhaps it is every man's dream to have a harem, however the women's libbers might look at it! Nonetheless let it be said here and now that I do NOT believe that women should be kept barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen. I see absolutely no reason why they should not have slippers!

As far as the Ancient Egyptian women are concerned, it would seem that they achieved a considerable amount of freedom, automony and equality, but that they still ranked behind the men in almost every aspect of life. The question to be asked in this assembly is, was the position any different in the area of physical activity. I have said elsewhere that one cannot expect mores to be different in sports, games and physical activities from what they are in other spheres of life. I would expect, therefore, to find that the trends which are shown in the social sphere, in law and in religion, will also be seen in sport.

I realize that stating a conviction so baldly will lead observers to say that I will find what I expect to find. Perhaps that is true, although I think not, but this is not the time to go into a discussion of historiography; I merely want to state that I am aware of the possibility.

Yet another note of warning must be sounded here. To speak of the "Ancient Egyptians" is to lump together many centuries of life in one geographical area - a dangerous procedure. However, the dearth of material, in relation to the length of time covered, makes this almost inevitable. Luckily, the knowledge that the Egyptian society was one of the most static ever known, makes it far less misleading than might be the case when speaking of almost any other society.

As was mentioned earlier, we know that men and women participated together in a number of activities. There are many indications of husband and wife being a "matched pair" and that being together and doing things together were important to both and that they were friendly and loving. In scenes in which man and wife are shown enjoying a banquet, for instance, the wife is often elegantly attired in a close-fitting robe made from fine, transparent linen, and wears rich jewelry, while both man and wife are being served by naked slave-girls, while musicians play and dancers exhibit their abilities as they sway in time to the music or perform chorus-line type kicks. Similarly the ladies watched wrestling bouts or neboot matches with their husbands, and man and wife played board games that were similar to today's game of chess or checkers.

This familial closeness was not reserved to indoor activities. The whole family would go out fowling and fishing, but it is noteworthy that the records always show the male throwing the stick at the birds, or pulling in the fish on the line, while it is the women-folk who support the thrower in the boat, or pick up the fall birds, or take the fish from the hook and re-bait it.

The ladies, apparently, did not indulge in the more arduous physica pursuits. There is no evidence of them going big-game hunting and although the claim has been made that they wrestled, the evidence is very slight. And while it appears that women did row, the only report known to this writer of the ladies acting as oarswomen shows that the women were made to perform as entertainment for the Pharaoh, and the fact that he had them dressed in nothing but fishing nets suggests that it was not their skill with the oars with which he was primarily concerned.

Today we have become accustomed to ladies not only riding horses but competing on equal terms with men and, in some forms of equestr

sports, winning more than their fair share of trophies. In ancient Egypt there is little evidence that the ladies rode horses. although the patron deity of horses was Astarte, a Syrian goddess. In any case, the horse was not usually ridden, being mainly used to pull the chariot. It is tempting to think, however, that the small, Ancient Egyptian horse, might have proved a better mount for the lighter-weight lady than for the man. Such a thought is pure speculation, however.

One of the facts with which we have to contend is that there are far fewer artifacts supplying evidence of women participating in physical activity than there are showing men at work and play. While this may, or may not, mean that there were fewer activities in which women participated, it does suggest that the men had control over such things as the tomb-painting, the writing and so on, which helps to illustrate the secondary nature of the women's role in the society.

This fact would also account for the high proportion of illustrations, showing women in what one might term "sex-object" roles. For instance, there is no doubt that young ladies played ball games, although there is great doubt as to how those games were played, and even whether they were true games or religious rites. Common-sense, coupled with the number of balls that have been discovered in the tombs of children, suggests that, while balls may have been used in religious rites, ball-games were also a part, and probably a major part, of the young girl's sporting life and religious activities. However, the interesting point, when we look at the role women played, is that often the ball-players are shown wearing clothing which suggests that their physical charms were an important aspect of the spectacle.

The same thing is true in the dance. Both men and women participated in dancing, often at the same time and place, if not actually "together". These dances had in many, if not all, cases a strong religious significance, such as those performed to accompany the procession of a tomb-statue. The dances were extremely acrobatic in nature and called for a very high level of skill. Presumably male and female dancers were equally important in the rituals. Yet often the state of dress, or undress, of the ladies suggests that dancing ability was not the only criterion for their inclusion.

It is extremely difficult to obtain anything like a clear picture of the sporting activities of the ladies of Ancient Egypt and much of what evidence does exist is very ambiguous. For instance, the "perfume-spoons" are usually taken to represent women swimming despite the fact that the pose, with legs together and straight, and arms stretched out in front, is not one that readily suggests swimming. However, the women are normally shown holding a bird in their outstretched hands, the bird forming the bowl of the spoon. There are reliefs showing that women were used to catch water fowl by swimming up to them and grabbing them as they sat

on the water, thus the perfume spoons may simply be a depiction of this activity. If such is the case, it may well be that the nudity of the swimmers in these cases should be interpreted as a practical measure, rather than as an attempt to arouse prurient passions.

In this context, it is interesting to note that in the only illustration known to this writer showing young men and girls playing together (in a game resembling Ring-A-Rosy) the ladies appear to be adequately clothed, as do the males, whereas in scenes with just women they are often provocatively clothed and in scenes with only men, the men are frequently as naked as an Ancient Greek athlete. Similarly, in illustrations showing the Pharaoh and his Queen playing a board-game, the Queen is not taking any unfair advantage by wearing clothing designed to distract her husband from the game. It appears likely, then, that the ladies' see-through clothing was part of the ceremonial in religious, presumably fertility, rites.

It was mentioned that a few Queens managed to become rulers of Egypt in their own right. Perhaps the best-known and most successful of these was Queen Hatshepsut. Now it was the custom for the King, on the thirtieth anniversary of his accession to the throne, to run round a pre-set course, presumably with the idea of showing that he had not lost his physical prowess. Interestingly enough, a depiction of Queen Hatshepsut has come down to us, showing her running this same course. She, like her male counter-parts, is shown running with long, springy strides, wearing the crown of Egypt, carrying the symbol of roy authority, wearing a waist-skirt and sporting a false beard. One suspects that a woman who has been in office for thirty years would require the artist to take a little licence in showing her running stride, but more to the point the artist has also used his licence to remove the femininity from the lady-Pharaoh making her appear much more like the male whose role she was playing than the woman she really was.

It is, perhaps, no more than one would expect, that a woman who had usurped a man's place, should be almost disguised as a man, but the procedure does emphasize the pre-eminence of the male, does suggest that physical prowess was seen as a masculine attribute, one demonstrating virility, and does lend weight to the idea that, despite their freedoms and opportunities, women were second-class citizens in Ancient Egypt, whose physical prowess was secondary to their role as sex-objects.

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